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09/27/06

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Senate Commerce Committee Approves Drought Information Bill

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Senate Commerce Committee today unanimously approved **S. 2751, the National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006**, sponsored by Sen. Ben Nelson (D-Nebraska). The bill now awaits consideration by the full Senate.



The National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006 will create a drought early warning system that would maintain a web-based information clearinghouse, provide drought monitoring, prepare the weekly U.S. Drought Monitor (which covers all 50 states), and develop drought policy and planning techniques. The goal of the legislation is to create a drought information system that will coordinate information on drought. The research done upfront in monitoring drought trends will help mitigate and improve response to the effect of drought and implementing a risk management type strategy will save taxpayers billions in reduced disaster assistance in the future. The NIDIS would be incorporated into the Global Earth Observation System of Systems and the bill authorizes funding of \$8 million to \$11 million annually for NIDIS through fiscal year 2012.

Committee on Science
SHERWOOD BOEHLERT, CHAIRMAN
Bart Gordon, Tennessee, Ranking Democrat

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HOUSE PASSES DROUGHT MITIGATION BILL

Bill Would Help Protect Nation's Crops, Save Economy Billions

WASHINGTON, September 26, 2006 – The House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly tonight to mitigate the effects of severe droughts which destroy wide swaths of the nation's cropland and drain billions of dollars from the U.S. economy annually.

According to the Drought Monitor, in the past year almost 90 percent of the Continental United States experienced some degree of "abnormal dryness" with over half of the country having experienced severe drought or worse. Forty-five states were impacted by drought; 36 faced severe to extreme drought, resulting in billions of dollars in damage.

Legislation approved by the House today would establish a coordinated federal effort to more accurately monitor and predict costly droughts. The bill, H.R. 5136, *National Integrated Drought Information System Act of 2006*, introduced by **Rep. Ralph Hall**, passed by voice vote. It was endorsed by a panel of witnesses representing Western states, water resource agencies, and farming interests at an Environment, Technology, and Standards Subcommittee hearing on May 4. It passed the Science Committee on June 6.

"Our nation approaches droughts through crisis management rather than through proactive solutions to manage the problem," **Hall** said. "The resources that are available to monitor droughts are very general in nature and only offer regional-scale data. Moreover, the data is not circulated in a way that is accessible on the local level by farmers and other interested parties. The bill before us today addresses these shortcomings. By creating a comprehensive drought information system, we enable our local, state and national leaders to be more proactive in their approach to droughts."

"Drought is a pernicious disaster; it can creep up on you in the form of pleasantly cloudless days, but once it has arrived it can destroy livelihoods, damage valuable ecosystems, and even threaten human health," stated **Environment, Technology, and Standards Subcommittee Chairman Vernon J. Ehlers** (R-MI), who managed floor debate on the bill. "This bill gives farmers, utilities, forest managers, waterway operators, tourism companies, reservoir managers, and the general public the tools they need to make thoughtful and informed choices about how to limit the impact of drought on our economy, our environment, and our quality of life."

Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), a cosponsor of the legislation, added, "This bill won't prevent drought, but it will greatly mitigate the toll drought takes on our economy by equipping our farmers and water resource managers with the tools they need

to prepare for and respond to drought situations.”

H.R. 5136 would establish a National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) that would help decision makers better prepare for drought periods by expanding monitoring and data collection systems to include coordinated, comprehensive coverage of key indicators such as soil moisture and ground water; implementing an integrated data collection and dissemination system; and developing effective and useful tools to support analysis and decision making at all levels and geographic scales.

Losses due to drought are not inevitable. With better forecasting of coming droughts water managers can change reservoir release schedules and water restrictions, farmers can choose crops with lower water demands and change the timing of high-water use crops, forest managers can pre-position water and fire-fighting assets to reduce the likelihood of devastating fires, and waterway managers can alter water releases and dredging activities to maintain open waterways and allow barge and shipping traffic to pass. Managers of animal stocks can budget for increased feed costs and can sell excess stock early when prices are still high, and energy providers can manage reservoir and fuel levels to minimize electricity costs due to reduced hydro-power capacity.

The bill would authorize a total of \$81 million for the NIDIS program for the years 2007 through 2012.

A nearly identical Senate companion bill, S. 2751, will be considered by the Senate Commerce Committee tomorrow.

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